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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

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DATE: December 10, 1976

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Jose Luis de Imaz, Professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of Buenos Aires
Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA
Mr. Wayne S. Smith, Political Counselor

PLACE: Claridge Hotel

COPIES: AMB, DCM, ARA-Mr. Bray

(Dr. de Imaz is Argentina's leading sociologist and author of the first serious study of Argentine society, published in the mid-1960's under the Spanish title Los Que Mandan and the English title Those Who Rule. He studied for three years at the University of Paris, speaks fluent French, visited the US for several months during the summer and fall of 1968, and speaks passable English.)

I told Dr. de Imaz that I had had the pleasure of reading Those Who Rule in preparation for my visit and had specifically asked the Embassy to arrange a discussion with him just prior to my departure. We talked for over two hours. The following are the highlights of the conversation:

1) He is just finishing an "autobiography" which is, in fact, autobiographical of his generation. He believes that it has withdrawn from effective participation in the political system, having entered early and been burned out by one (or more) of the three main currents of political action which have dominated Argentina over the past 20 years: Christianity, fascism and marxism--all of which are extremely demanding, absolutist systems of thought and emotion. He noted that it is relatively easy for an individual whose mentality demands absolutist solutions to flip-flop from one to the other; he noted that the Montoneros had originally begun as a Catholic, rightist youth movement with justice as its goal; it had evolved in the past 7-8 years to its present anarchist, vaguely marxist point of view. Its fundamental goal is the "purification" of Argentine society, a goal it hopes to accomplish by the destruction of all existing institutions; it has no positive objective, but believes that from purification-by-violence, something better will necessarily emerge.

All three strands of the past 20 years could be found within the Peronist Movement--a fact which helped to explain its incoherence and inability to evolve a single sensible, pragmatic set of policies with which to govern the country.

2) I said that after a week of discussions with representatives of a wide range of Argentine society, I was depressed by the seeming absence of underlying consensus among political actives; the only common point seemed to be that each sector wished to maximize its share of the pie, and the devil take the hindmost

Drafted by: WCBBray:jr

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 --indeed, there seemed almost total lack of concern for the size (or even the maintenance) of the pie itself. Dr. de Imaz agreed, and illustrated his agreement by projecting ahead into 1977. He described the objectives of various sectors as he anticipated them, noted that there was almost no overlap in those objectives, and concluded that only the power of the Army could serve as social "glue" binding society together, at least in the short term. He noted that this phenomenon of differing objectives existed in all societies. What made Argentina different was that the mechanisms for inter-group bargaining, compromise and cooperation were so weak.

3) Dr. de Imaz described the different mentalities of the three military services. The Navy was elitist, highly socialized by virtue of common, shipboard experiences, and quite isolated from the realities of national life. The Air Force had an absolutist, Roman Catholic tradition and a strong fascist approach to political life. Of the three services, only the Army--by virtue of the fact that it lived more among the people--had a sense of political nuance; the nuanced mind is by definition the more moderate mind, although he noted that there were also some very tough types in the Army as well.

He noted that in Argentina, as was not the case in Brazil or Peru, the military had a deep fear of being "used"--perhaps because one civilian sector or party had traditionally enlisted the military to turn an opponent out of power, or to assist one group of civilians into power. The present implication of this fear of being used was that the military would not create a government of "technicians" as in Brazil, except perhaps in the economic ministries. But even there, the military would deliberately create a sense of uncertainty of tenure among the economic technicians in order to keep them off balance.

4) I asked Dr. de Imaz to explain the conflict between the Catholic Church and the military. He responded that the problem was very simple: the military are a strongly, hierarchically ordered sub-society with a strong internal ethic; they have--in Argentina, at least--never been comfortable holding military power and have therefore looked to the Church as a comforting friend, if not necessarily a political (as opposed to a psychological) ally. When, however, the military looks to the post-conciliar Church it finds an institution "infected" with "liberal" and relativist values--an institution which is no longer equally hierarchical, but increasingly horizontal in its approach to society. This phenomenon is deeply unsettling and explains the fact that the military is tempted to see enemies within the Church even where they may not exist (although he did believe that there were, in fact, subversive elements in small numbers within the Church).

Much the same phenomenon helped to explain the "cleansing" of the universities (which had, in fact and far too broadly in his view, become centers of subversion). He had a good friend at the University of Cordoba, also a sociologist, who had long taught a course on Argentine society. The Air Force had attempted to impose on him the requirement to "insist" (in his course) on the "correctness" of traditional Argentine values; when he refused, he was relieved of his teaching duties.

5) Dr. de Imaz volunteered that there was something in the Argentine personality--and he thought it reflected the Mediterranean, Roman Catholic heritage of the dominant Spanish/Italian populations--which both demanded order and resisted it.

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Groups found it exceedingly difficult to define common objectives or to pursue them in common. The result, he said, was an almost universal longing for the "strong man" who would, by force of personality (if not program), impose order where none could be achieved by more democratic procedures. He noted that Peron was such a man, and that a military junta was as well--although he declared that President Videla was far from being the kind of dominant, charismatic leader to whom most Argentines would look for "guidance." Videla was a strong individual, but his personality was that of the negotiator and conciliator. He thought that Videla's personality (and hence approach to public life) helped to explain some of the increasingly obvious stresses within the junta. He noted in passing, for example, that he believed Videla was personally uncomfortable to be confronted with the very strong personality of Economic Minister Martinez de Hoz; as a result, he believed, Videla had deliberately created a new, vigorous Ministry of Planning under the direction of General Diaz Bessone so that Videla could set one against the other and assume the role of mediator.

6) I asked Dr. de Imaz how he thought the US should approach the problem of human rights in Argentina.

He began by noting that his friend in Cordoba had been sacked for not kowtowing to the Air Force, and that the Government had been guilty of the most serious violations of human rights. On the other hand, he said, he himself was never certain "from morning to morning" whether the terrorists would let him live through the day. His best friend had been driving with his seven children one day recently when the terrorists stopped the car, leaned through the front window put a pistol to his forehead and shot him dead in front of his family.

He said that successive Argentine governments paid what was in his view "excessive attention" to the Washington Post and, particularly, the New York Times (believing the latter had dominant influence on the thinking of, for example, the banking and governmental communities). Thus, they tended to be very attentive to the editorial pages of the two newspapers. He also said that, since Argentines tended to be very unsophisticated in their understanding of the US, they were as attentive "to a Senator from Arkansas or Missouri" as to a Secretary of State. Declarations by members of Congress were, hence, accorded disproportionate attention. While neither newspaper editorials nor speeches would have a "determinative" effect on GOA policies, they would weigh in the balance and at the margin.

I said that human rights was a matter of broad public interest in the United States and in its Government and that pressures seemed to be building for a strong, public stand on the problem of human rights in many countries (and that these pressures could take the form of sanctions). He reacted immediately and vigorously--indeed his reaction was the most vigorous I encountered during the week--by saying that nothing would more certainly arouse Argentine nationalism; indeed, he said, if he were the President of Argentina he would immediately establish a "Committee to Investigate Human Rights in the US," thereby (1) making maximum capital of the negative popular reaction to US sanctions and (2) effectively burying the issue of human rights in Argentina.

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